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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 001794

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SUBJECT: UNDAUNTED BISHOPS SEEK BENCHMARKS TO STIMULATE TALKS

REF: (A) HARARE 1711 (B) HARARE 1599 (C) HARARE 1130

1. (C) SUMMARY: The bishops troika on September 10 updated Ambassador Sullivan on their efforts to facilitate inter-party talks. They were encouraged by ZANU-PF Chairman John Nkomo's invitation to a meeting earlier that day, although they did not expect ZANU-PF to re-activate the bishops' initiative formally in the foreseeable future. With a view to inducing Mugabe to move forward on talks, they urged the USG and other international players to identify concrete benchmarks -- tangible international benefits that would correspond with tangible political progress in Zimbabwe. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) The Manicaland bishops troika of Anglican Bishop and President of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) Sebastian Bakare, President of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) Bishop Trevor Manhanga, and President of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC) Patrick Mutume came to the Residence on September 10 for an exchange with Ambassador Sullivan on recent developments. The bishops had just come from a meeting with Minister for Special Affairs and ZANU-PF Chairman John Nkomo.

3. (C) The bishops reported that they had been lying low for some time, not wanting to be seen as exerting influence on recent local elections. The election results, however, seemed to give new impetus for attention to resumption of interparty talks. The results underscored to ZANU-PF leaders the party's sagging popularity and influence among important constituencies. Manhanga said ZANU-PF still was not prepared to come to the table right away but the bishops were encouraged that Nkomo had invited them to talk. Nkomo had not disclosed anything new in their meeting, but the bishops were scheduled to meet MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai later that day and planned to see Nkomo again on September 15. The bishops expected to meet Mugabe again at an unspecified time after that to report on their meetings with party leaders and representatives of the international community.

4. (C) Speculating on how to motivate the parties to talk, Mutume emphasized the importance of not making ZANU-PF appear to lose in agreeing to talk. At this early stage, the key would be to "bargain" to a position where the ruling party at least was effectively dislodged from the driver's seat. Bakare stressed the need to accommodate to some extent ZANU-PF's warped view of itself. It was a liberation party, unchallenged in power for 23 years; the increasingly apparent erosion of its popularity presented a too radically different situation for many to absorb. One key would be to keep the reasonable moderates, such as Nkomo and Party Spokesman Nathan Shamuyarira, engaged and credible.

5. (C) All three underscored the potential value of getting an indication of benchmarks from international players for expanded engagement with Zimbabwe. In particular, what measures (beyond existing programs) would the USG be prepared to implement to help Zimbabwe and to what specific measures of political progress would they be tied? The bishops asserted that having such indications from the USG, the UK and others would make their upcoming meeting with Mugabe much more productive. They wanted to tell Mugabe specifically what the international community expected of Zimbabwe and what Zimbabwe could expect from the international community. The bishops recognized that Mugabe should not be rewarded for nothing, but some hope, short of promise, on these points could reduce the unhelpful level of distrust and indecision.

6. (C) Bakare expressed optimism about a "new language" being spoken by the government but cautioned that a new course had yet to be charted. The bishops were further encouraged by progress shown in the conduct of recent elections. The bishops' code of conduct subscribed to by the three Mutare mayoral candidates (ref A) had been a success and offered a potential model for future elections. Following the elections, interested parties, including war veteran representatives, had met on September 8 in a constructive atmosphere, and the police had committed to follow through on the various complaints filed by each side. Events in Bindura, Marondera, and Rusape nonetheless

reflected the ruling party's dominant nature in that the opposition was not permitted to present its candidacies or was subject to heavy intimidation. Manhanga emphasized the importance of measured, balanced public comments on Zimbabwe, as the USG's statement on recent elections had been.

17. (C) COMMENT: This is the third time (refs A and B) that the bishops have pushed us for benchmarks they could share with Mugabe. While we are skeptical that establishing concrete benchmarks in advance of tangible political progress will be decisive in getting Mugabe off the dime on talks, ZANU-PF insecurities about western intentions remain a considerable obstacle for those who support talks. In that vein, we should be mindful of opportunities to offer balanced, non-provocative statements on Zimbabwean developments (a la the recent one on elections), recognizing incremental progress when appropriate while continuing to hold the GOZ accountable for ongoing abuses. In ref C, we laid out incremental steps the USG could take as the political situation here improved. While consideration of such steps would be premature now, it might serve US interests to identify to the GOZ discreetly (perhaps via the bishops) tangible measures of political progress and benefits potentially available to Zimbabwe down the road. We shall make more specific recommendations septel.

SULLIVAN